




ILCA's INSIDE TRACK

a resource for breastfeeding mothers

A Publication of the International
Lactation Consultant Association 

Using Your Hands to Express Your Milk

By Anne Merewood, PhD, MPH, IBCLC, and Jane Abeel Morton, MD, FABM

Although in many countries women use breast pumps to express their milk, recent research shows that using your hands can work just as well—even better when you need to remove early milk (colostrum) in the first 3 days after birth. The following information should help you to learn this simple technique:

- It can be useful to hand express in the first 3 days because the amount of milk you remove during this time affects what you make later on: hand expressing now can boost your long term supply.
- Especially in the early days, hand expression often works better than pump suction.
- Once your supply goes up, you can often get more milk if you use a pump *and* your hands at the same time.
- Once your milk comes in, or if you are apart from your baby for some time, your breasts might get hard (“engorged”). Hand expression helps you to soften the breast and get the flow of milk going. This also makes it easier for the baby to latch on.
- In an emergency, you will be able to remove milk without a pump.
- If your milk supply drops, you can hand express a little bit (like a teaspoon) from each breast a dozen times a day and this should help your supply go up again.

How Do You Hand Express Early Milk?

In the first days, expect to express only drops. Keep it simple; you can express when you have a moment without trying to collect milk or worry that you are “wasting” it. The more you remove, the more you will produce later. Practice in the shower, or after you’ve put your baby down, at least 6 times a day. Here’s how to begin:

1. Place your hands over your breasts and gently massage for just a minute.

2. Form a “C” with your fingers about an inch back from the edge of the dark area around the nipple (the areola) with your nipple midway between your thumb and index (pointing) finger. Then,
 - **PRESS** back toward your chest.
 - **COMPRESS** your breast with the soft pads of your thumb and index finger. Continue to press backward (inward) and avoid sliding your fingers down toward the nipple.
 - **RELAX** the pressure and start over.
 - **PRESS . . . COMPRESS . . . RELAX**
3. Go back and forth from 1 breast to the other (right, to left, to right) with up to about 10 compressions on each breast before switching. As you learn to express your milk, you will discover the “sweet spots” where the milk drops will come out the easiest.
4. If you can, collect your milk into a spoon or, as you get more, into a small cup or into the breast shield of the pump.



Hand expression of colostrum (early milk) in first 3 days



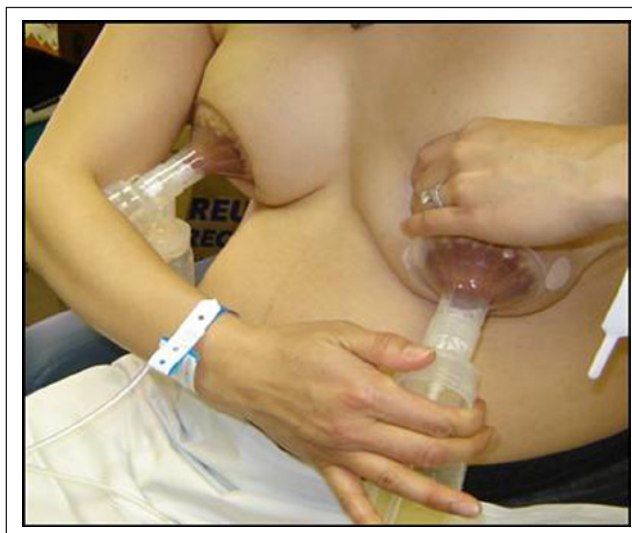
In the first 3 days after birth, you may see only drops. But after a few days, you will start seeing sprays of milk. As with everything, “practice makes perfect,” so hang in there until it works for you!

For the step-by-step demonstration of **how to hand express**, you can watch a free demo at <http://newborns.stanford.edu/Breastfeeding/HandExpression.html>.

How Can You Combine Hand Expression with Electric Pumping, Called “Hands-On Pumping”?

Instead of just relying on a pump’s suction once your milk comes in, you will be able to remove more milk and drain the firmer areas around your breast by doing “hands-on pumping.” This means compressing the breast and massaging at the same time you pump:

1. Gently massage the breasts.
2. Begin by pumping both breasts—at the same time if possible—with an electric pump. Also at the same time, use your hands to massage and compress milk out of the breasts, on 1 breast, then the other, back and forth. A hands-free pumping bra (or a sports bra with holes cut out) makes this easier to free up your hands. You will learn the best place to use your hands by feeling for areas of firmness and watching for sprays in the clear plastic connector.
3. Once the sprays nearly stop, take the shields off. Take a few minutes’ break to massage your breasts, especially around the outer areas of your breasts.
4. Finish using the pump and your hands in a way that works best for you. Either pump 1 breast at a time using both your hands and the pump (single pump) or rely only on hand expression. Either way, go back and forth several times at least, from 1 breast to the other, giving each a short rest before returning.



Hands-on pumping of milk after day 3

Even though you will probably remove only a small amount of milk with step 4, you will be sending a strong signal to your breasts to produce more milk. Develop your own style of hands-on pumping and you will feel the difference when your breasts are well emptied. Using hands-on pumping, not relying only on pump suction alone, will increase milk production and increase the richness of your milk.

For the step-by-step demonstration of **how to do hands-on pumping**, you can watch a free demo at <http://newborns.stanford.edu/Breastfeeding/MaxProduction.html>.

Authors' Note: Photos and video clips courtesy of Jane Morton, MD, Breastmilk Solutions.

Find Help Fast

An IBCLC is an “International Board Certified Lactation Consultant”: someone with special training to help breastfeeding families. Go to “Find a Lactation Consultant” at www.ilca.org to locate a lactation consultant in your area. You can also ask your doctor or a nurse at your hospital.

Your local lactation consultant: